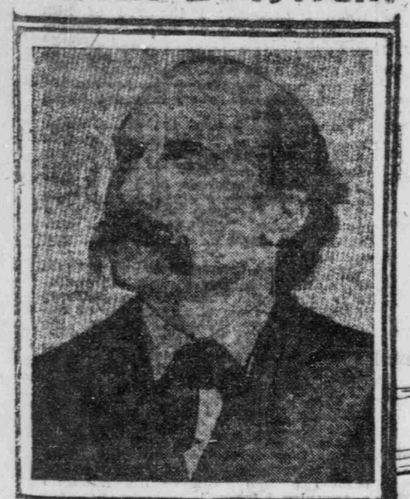
Stories of the SECRET SERVICE

By Captain Patrick D. Tyrrell.



JAMES R. BARRON.

I THOUGHT HE ACTED IN A FURTIVE MANNER.

HE FOUGHT DESPERATELY AND I OVERPOWERED HIM.

IGNATIUS SCHOEN

ADDIE E. BUCK

"SHOOT HIM." I CALLED TO SCOFIELD.

THE HOTEL THIEVES' SYNDICATE

Thirty years ago, before the advent of the gentry that steal under the cloak of business and finance, a thief was a thief, and made no effort to disguise his methods. As I cast back to that day I am led to believe it was the misfortune of some of the then noted criminals that they were born too soon to reap the greatest harvest of loot from their crimes. Among them were men with the genius for organization strongly developed, men brainy, daring and unscrupulous enough to attain commanding positions in the present-day world of genteel thievery had they taken their places on the stage at a later day. Then they used the jimmy and skeleton key instead of the seductive circular letter offering fabulous returns on investments, and where they met resistance, they brought into play the insistent six-shooter instead of the legal technicality.

The physical bravery that was necessary to the successful thief in the old days is probably responsible for the glamour of heroism and romance that invests the history of these bygone kings of crime. It is not a fine thing in any way for a modern thief to filch the savings of the poor through cleverly written advertisements; but the world, while not condoning the crime, ever will admire the courage of the train robber.

In turning the pages of my album of criminals' pictures I pause at the defiant face of Adam Brown, known to the last generation of thieves and detectives as James R. Barron, a man whom his fellows in crime delighted to honor. Barron was a leader born. Since the gates of the penitentiary swung behind him more than thirty years ago, I do not recall another who was peer in the organization and manipulation of criminal bands, nor one who displayed the same versatility and grasp of various forms of thievery. The operations of the numerous cliques that acknowledged his leadership were coextensive with the country, the wires for the most part being pulled from Chicago. The sensational crimes that led to his arrest and the remarkable fight the authorities made to bring about his imprisonment in the penitentiary form one of the most thrilling chapters in the criminal history of the country.

During the evening of January 15, 1878, Isaac Mills, a traveling salesman for the jewelry house of Arthur Rumrill, Wall street, New York, reported to the clerk of the Tremont house, Chicago, in which he was stopping, that the trunk containing his samples had been broken open during the evening meal hour and $21,000 worth of jewelry stolen. The loss was reported immediately by the clerk to police headquarters, then in the old Rookery. The same night I had returned from New York, whither the Shotwell bond robbery had taken me, and the next morning I was assigned to the case by Chief Washburn.

The circumstances of the robbery were these: Mills occupied two rooms, using one of them for a sleeping room and the other as a reception and display room. Both of them opened into the hall. In the sleeping room Mills kept the small trunk containing his samples of solid gold jewelry. The door from this room into the hall he kept fastened with a safety spring that fitted into the keyhole and which could be released only with a key he carried with him. The door connecting his two rooms and the door leading from the reception room into the hall were kept locked with the ordinary key. The trunk was also kept locked when he was not taking samples from it or replacing them.

On the Saturday night in question he had gone to the dining room about 6:30 and had spent half an hour there, returning immediately to his rooms. He found the doors locked and his trunk broken open.

The manner of the theft was not difficult to determine. The thief had opened the reception room door with a skeleton key, climbed through the transom over the connecting door, secured the jewelry, and escaped the same way he had entered. The safety appliance on the other hall door had not been tampered with, the thief probably being familiar with its effectiveness, as it was a device in general use at that time by jewelry salesmen who carried samples of value. Those carried by Mills were all of solid gold, and among them was a large number of watch chains valued at $175 each. The pattern of these chains was entirely new and easily distinguishable from any other on the market.

The job had been deftly and cleanly done, not the slightest clew having been left by the robber. The case was one of those difficult affairs in which the detective has absolutely nothing on which to work except such general conclusions as he might draw. One of these, at which I promptly arrived after my survey of the rooms, was that the thief was a skilled one. Traces of a master hand were easily discernible, but a mere impression that a crime has been committed by a crook of experience is a hazy starting point in the search for the culprit. In this case the probable fact that the thief was a "professional" of ability could reasonably be supplemented by the theory that he belonged to the special class that devotes its efforts to relieving hotel guests of their valuables.

As a rule criminals are specialists and seldom make excursions into spheres of crime that have not been closely studied by them. A pickpocket is seldom a burglar and a "con" man never commits a crime of violence. Most of the thefts committed in hotels are the work of men whose specialty is stealing from hotel rooms. The second conclusion to be drawn, therefore, was that some accomplished thief in the hotel line had been rude enough to enter Mr. Mills' room and abstract his jewelry. While I reasoned in this way there was the chance that I was entirely wrong, for there are no hard and fast rules of procedure governing criminal operations any more than such rules govern other lines of human activity.

It was in a not very hopeful frame of mind that I returned to headquarters. Other detectives from "Central" had the banks and hotels for their special fields, and with the previous record of hotel thefts I was no more familiar than one might become by reading the newspapers. I determined to acquaint myself with this record, however, and proceeded to examine the confidential reports to the chief of detectives touching recent crimes, sorting out all those relative to thefts committed in hotels. These were about a dozen in number during the three months preceding the theft of the Mills jewelry. Besides the number, which was large enough to be significant, I found a general similarity of method running through them. None of them had been solved, and all remained as mysterious as was the Tremont house robbery. In most of the cases room doors had been opened without injury to the locks and valuables taken from the rooms during the absence of the occupants, no material clew to the identity of the thieves being left for the detectives to work from.

The more carefully I studied these reports the more firmly I became convinced that a well organized band of hotel thieves was at work in Chicago, and, if I were correct in this, it was only reasonable to argue that the Mills robbery had been the work of some member of this band. The value of the booty previously secured was small compared with the haul made at the Tremont house.

After stowing carefully in my memory the details of the various thefts reported, I repaired to the Clifton hotel, in which a guest had been robbed some time before. Going back on the register to the day preceding the night on which the robbery had occurred, I began the examination of the signatures, calling the clerk to my aid in the work. Many of the arrivals of that day were known either personally or by reputation by the clerk, and these were at once checked off. As much as could be remembered of the others by the hotel employes was considered, and one by one they also were checked off in the process of elimination.

In this way the list was reduced to one name—that placed on the register by a man who had arrived during the day. He carried a small valise and explained to the clerk that he was going away the next morning early and wished to be called. He paid for the room in advance. When the bell-boy made the call at the hour designated the room was vacant and the bed evidently had not been slept in. No significance was attached to the fact, as it often happened that guests vacated their rooms after leaving calls, before the calls were made. I requested the privilege of cutting the signature in question from the register.

This process was repeated at each hotel from which a robbery had been reported. I found in every case that a room had been paid for in advance, a call left, and the room vacated before the call was made. In several instances the name was signed in the same handwriting and even the same initials, "G. W.," used, with different surnames. In two cases two men had arrived together and been assigned to the same room. Such meager descriptions as I could gather were taken and they tallied in several instances.

There was no longer any doubt in my mind that all of the thefts had been committed by the same crowd. But in vain I searched the Tremont house register for a signature corresponding in character to any of the suspected signatures I had cut from the various registers, and I came to the conclusion that the thief in this case had shadowed Mills' room without having taken a room in the hotel. This did not alter my convictions, however, that the Tremont job had been done by one of the crowd who had committed the thefts in the other hotels.

On the day following the robbery at the Tremont I had a long conversation with Mills concerning the men who had access to his rooms. Aside from a few personal friends most of his callers had been local jewelers, who had come to his rooms to look at his samples and buy goods. He named these one by one.

"Did you have any callers who did not buy jewelry?" I asked.

Mills ran over the list and then said: "Yes, one man came here two or three times and looked through my samples but bought nothing."

"Who was he?" I asked."

Mills named a jeweler and auctioneer who kept a store in Clark street south of the Kohl & Middleton museum.

"Was there anything unusual in his actions?"

"Nothing whatever, except that I recall the fact of his having made the impression on me that he had no intention of buying when he came here. I wasted no time on him on that account."

I made a mental note of the incident, and, so far as I had time, kept an eye on the Clark street store. In passing it one day my attention was attracted to a man coming out of it. I thought he acted in a furtive manner. Then I dismissed the thought as a bit of imagination arising from my suspicions of the owner of the store, but I afterward found that my first intuition had been correct.

For some time previous to the events here narrated there had been living in the rear of 149 South Halsted street a family named Ewing. John, the head of the family, had married a widow with one daughter, and these three composed the family. Ewing was a thief, who had finished a term in the Minnesota penitentiary, and had settled in Chicago with his family. He did not ply his trade here, but, after "turning a trick" outside of the city, would return to Chicago to plan the next excursion into the country. His cottage was a rendezvous for thieves of the better class. I knew him and his wife. The latter, although fully familiar with the manner of life led by her husband and his associates and entirely true to his interests, was anxious to keep a home where he would be free from molestation by the police and could live a life of apparent respectability at intervals at least.

I knew the woman's ambition in this particular and believed it could be turned to good account. Arranging an interview with Mrs. Ewing, I questioned her concerning the movements of certain thieves, and learned from her that Thomas White and John Horton, two of the most dangerous hotel thieves in the country, had been calling on her husband. Without telling her why I wanted them, I asked her to secure for me the natural signatures of White and Horton, and this she promised to do, it being understood that they were to be obtained in a way that would arouse no suspicion on the part of either. These signatures I soon had in my possession. Comparison with those I had cut from the different hotel registers served to show beyond doubt that two of the mysterious hotel guests had been White and Horton. There was one signature, however, which evidently had not been made by either White or Horton, as the comparison plainly showed.

Mrs. Ewing furnished another valuable clew in the statement that Horton was a frequent visitor to the Clark street jewelry store. From conversations she had overheard she was convinced that Horton was transacting "business" with the proprietor of the store; in other words, that he was "fencing" some of the band's stolen jewelry at that place. As she named the men who frequented her husband's house in a social way I found one of them to be the son of a prominent and respected merchant in the jewelry trade, but no offense further than his association with jewelry thieves ever was fastened on this young man.

As I said in the beginning, Adam Brown, or James R. Barron, was at that time a most distinguished criminal. He was a Scotchman, 27 years old, and had brought to bear on his nefarious calling all the strength of character and shrewdness that have distinguished the Scot in so many lines of human endeavor.

Barron had been a clerk in a dry goods store in Montreal several years before and had stolen considerable quantities of goods from his employer. Under a cloud, he drifted to other eastern cities, and in each place was a thief. Although never in serious trouble, the east grew warm for him, and he came to Chicago, where he worked at Partridge's, Carson, Pirie, Scott & Co.'s, The Fair and other large stores for a time. But his sprouting ambition in the field of crime would no longer brook the restrictions of even a pretense of honest employment, and he gathered around him through his inborn capacity of a leader a large number of criminals over whom he assumed despotic command. Most of these men were thieves of established reputation and years of experience, and it was a cause for wonderment among detectives who knew of the sudden rise of Barron that they flocked to the standard of a comparative novice in crime; but such was the tribute they paid to the qualities of his leadership.

His enlisted men were divided into squads, according to their specialties. Barron mapped out the campaign for each. He ordered them into different parts of the country to execute plans he had formulated. The booty secured, it was turned over to Barron, who had displayed his masterly ability by establishing the most complete network of connections with dishonest merchants and "fences" any thief in this country ever had. In Cincinnati, St. Louis, Buffalo, Detroit and many other cities he had agents—most of them supposedly reputable merchants—who disposed of the booty shipped to them by Barron.

In Chicago he had several receiving and distributing depots where the miscellaneous assortment of stolen property was sorted, repacked and shipped. It was one of the functions in his leadership, also, to protect his men from trouble with the officers of the law, and, once they found themselves in the toils, to secure their release. At this he was as adept as in the command of men and the disposal of stolen property.

Before his first arrival in Chicago Barron had spent some little time in Pittsburg, and there had met the wife of William E. Buck, a saloonkeeper. The woman, fascinated by his dashing style and glib talk, deserted her husband and came with him to Chicago, where her aged mother, a Mrs. Kelly, lived. Barron and the woman took up their residence at 17 Ann street under the name of Burton. Knowing in a general way that Barron was a man who would undoubtedly make his mark in his chosen profession, I deemed it advisable to lay wires by which I might keep in touch with his movements, and, with that end in view, I formed the acquaintance of Mrs. Kelly, with whose daughter Barron was living. She knew my reasons for wanting to keep track of Barron, and, as she felt any way but friendly toward him on account of his having induced her daughter to leave her husband, she willingly but secretly gave me such information concerning Barron's movements as came to her through her daughter.

In the process of organizing his combination of thieves Barron had included in the individual groups a clique of hotel thieves. From the information that had leaked out at John Ewing's in the hearing of his wife I was positive that White and Horton were two of the hotel workers who reported to Barron as their superior officer. Just how far Barron aided them in their actual operations I did not know, but I considered it of importance to identify the remaining suspicious signature cut from the hotel registers. I found some trouble in securing a specimen of Barron's handwriting, but, once in my possession, it was found to have been written by the men that placed the theretofore unidentified signature on the hotel register.

This was satisfactory progress, but along general lines only. I was satisfied that Barron's hotel thieves had robbed Isaac Mills and turned the jewelry over to him for sale. It was also probable that the proprietor of the Clark street jewelry house was running a "fence," and, under his cloak of respectability, had furnished Horton, White and Barron with information concerning the contents of Mills' trunk and its surroundings, information which he secured during his inspection of Mills' samples.

My investigation up to this point had progressed by inches and was almost at a standstill when chance smiled on me. There was in existence then—and I suppose is at the present time—an organization of jewelers for the mutual protection of themselves. Facilities for protecting trunks and sample cases on the road were not as complete then as they are now and the organization undertook to supply this lack, adding, I believe, an insurance feature against loss. William A. Giles was the Chicago representative of the association and he and I had talked the Tremont House robbery over with each other and with Mills. Mr. Giles had taken a keen interest in the case, although dependent on the police for the recovery of the jewelry and the capture of the robbers.

About the time I had thoroughly satisfied myself that the job had been done by Barron's crowd there arrived in Chicago a traveling salesman for a Boston jewelry firm named Philo W. Scofield. He handled the same class of goods as Mills—solid gold articles—a fact well known to the trade, and, presumably, by the thieves who kept in touch with the trade. Scofield had been in Chicago but a day or two when he was approached by two men who claimed to have failed in the jewelry business and who were seeking to dispose of some of the stock in hand. Scofield made some inquiry as to the character of the jewelry they had for sale and soon learned that there was a number of watch chains of a pattern which, from the description, seemed to correspond with the style of chains stolen from Mills. No samples, however, were produced.

Scofield made a second appointment. As soon as the visitors left, he notified Mr. Giles, who in turn informed me of the incident. At the second meeting Scofield agreed to purchase a quantity of the goods and a price per pennyweight for the solid gold jewelry was agreed upon, the proceeds of the sale to depend upon weight entirely. The "merchants" still refused to show their wares, but promised to produce them for inspection at a third meeting, to take place at the corner of Adams and Peoria streets the following day.

In this arrangement the pretended merchants followed the plan of most of their ilk—insistence on a series of meetings in order that they might satisfy themselves of the good faith toward them of the man to whom they planned to sell their goods. Scofield was adroit enough in his dealing with them to throw them off their guard. He reported the progress of his negotiations to Mr. Giles and me, and at either of the two meetings I could have accomplished the arrest of the suspects, but to have done so would have been to catch them with no incriminating evidence, and I determined to wait till they kept an appointment with Scofield with the jewelry we believed to have been stolen in their possession.

Our plan of action was this: Scofield's visitors had informed him they would appear at Adams and Peoria streets in a spring wagon with the jewelry, and Mr. Giles and I decided to drive to a point near the meeting place in a buggy. Scofield was to signal to us at the proper moment by raising his hat in a careless manner habitual with him. Mr. Giles then was to drive toward their wagon, and, when close enough, to turn into it, locking the front wheel of his buggy into the front wheel of their wagon. I was to be on foot near the scene, and, in the mix-up of the vehicles, to grab one of the men, while Scofield captured the other. A policeman selected for the purpose was to be stationed near to assist in the event our plans went awry.

Scofield was on the spot at the appointed time. I had left Mr. Giles' buggy and taken a stand around the corner. Promptly a horse attached to a spring wagon containing two men appeared, and, the driver sighting Scofield, turned his horse to the curb at the place the latter was waiting. The three men engaged in conversation for a moment and then I saw Scofield raise his hat from his head. At this signal I walked rapidly to the spot and Mr. Giles came driving toward the group. Quickly he locked his buggy wheel into the wagon. One of the men jumped and started to run, but I caught him and after a lively tussle succeeded in getting handcuffs on him. While doing so I saw his companion throw a bag from the wagon and start to run.

"Shoot him" I called to Scofield. Then the other officer ran to the scene and the escaping thief was soon in custody.

From the description given by Scofield I was confident that the more forward of the men who had been negotiating with him was James R. Barron, and Barron it was who leaped from the wagon almost into my arms. The bag contained about $7,000 worth of the watch chains stolen from Mills. Barron's companion was Ignatius Schoen, who, it developed, was one of Barron's valuable aids in the disposal of stolen property. It had been Barron whom I had seen leaving the Clark street jewelry store some time before, and, incidentally, the connection established in this case between Barron's hotel thieves and the jewelry store referred to resulted in the sudden disappearance of the proprietor of the store and the closing of his place.

Barron's attorney appeared before Justice Scully, secured a change of